

Australian Outlook

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The French Legislative Elections: Will Emmanuel Macron Form a Majority Government?

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On Sunday 12 and 19 June, the French will vote in legislative elections to elect 577 representatives at the National Assembly. Obtaining a majority in this House is crucial to form government.

What is the National Assembly?

In the French political system, the President appoints a Prime Minister and subsequently appoints a cabinet on their recommendation. The President and the Government constitute the executive power.

The Parliament, on the other hand, holds legislative power. The French parliament is bicameral: it has an upper house, the Senate, and a lower house, the National Assembly. The latter is critical because it passes laws and controls the government. If it disapproves of government action, it can use constitutional powers to provoke its dissolution. This means that whichever party or coalition has a majority of seats in the National Assembly will be able to form the government and to control its actions.

To put it simply, the June legislative elections for the National Assembly will decide if Emmanuel Macron can implement his reforms over the next five years. For Macron to be able to fully deliver his political program, his coalition, *Ensemble!*, must win the majority of the 577 seats in the National Assembly. History tells us that in most cases, the French people will support the party of a recently elected or re-elected president.

But that is not always the case. In recent decades, there have been three instances of what the French call a *cohabitation*: where the President belongs to a different political party than that of the Prime Minister and cabinet. From 1986 to 1988 and then from 1993 to 1995 left-wing president François Mitterrand had a right-wing government. The same happened to right-wing president Jacques Chirac who had to appoint a left-wing government from 1997 to 2002.

In such instances, the government and the National Assembly dominate, and the President's political impact becomes extremely limited. This is what Macron wants to avoid at all costs. While presidential elections capture media attention, the legislative elections are arguably more significant for the country's destiny.

Who are the main parties running for the 2022 legislative elections?

There are 6,293 candidates from about twenty parties running in these legislative elections, 56 percent of which are male and 44 percent female. The traditional right-wing party *Les Républicains* will present the fewest women at these elections. Interestingly, 44 percent of the candidates come from executive-type professional backgrounds, backgrounds that represent only 11 percent of the French working population. This class discrepancy is even more pronounced within Emmanuel Macron's party, with 66 percent of the candidates being from executive-type professional backgrounds. Given 78 percent of sitting members of the National Assembly are seeking re-election, it is predicted that there will be far less "new blood" in the 2022 house.

Overall, candidates belong to four major groups across the French political spectrum.

First, there is Emmanuel Macron's party, *Renaissance*, that will work with other centrist parties and movements such as the *MoDem* and *Horizons*. Those will run under the banner *Ensemble!*. This is a broad alliance that will attempt to attract voters on a spectrum ranging from the soft left and the moderate right.

Second, there is a new left-wing alliance called *NUPES* under the leadership of divisive politician Jean-Luc Mélenchon who has managed a rare feat: uniting the left under a common banner. His party, *La France Insoumise* has negotiated a deal with other left-wing parties such as the Greens, the French Communist Party, and the Socialist Party. Traditionally, the French Socialist Party was the party who federated the moderate left in France. Though the *NUPES* alliance sees itself as the only truly leftist force in the legislative battle, they may be too radical for traditional moderate left-wing voters.

Next up is the traditional right with the *Républicains* party, previously known as the UMP, once Nicolas Sarkozy's election-winning machine. They represent the traditional right: republican, Christian-democrat, somewhat socially, and at times economically, conservative. With Macron's arrival in the political arena, the right has lost a great deal of its moderate voters, while its more radical ones have migrated further right. The *Républicains* have an alliance with the UDI, a satellite centre-right party but are predicted to lose seats overall. Since 2017, *Républicains* have been the main party of opposition to Macron's party, but that is likely to change this month.

Finally, there is the fragmented far-right, with Marine Le Pen's party, the National Rally, Eric Zemmour's *Reconquête*, and others such as *les Patriotes* and *Debout la France*. Given that the French electoral system is neither proportional nor preferential, the far-right parties are an almost non-existent political force in the National Assembly and Senate. As the electoral system prevents them from getting into office, this group would be lucky to win more than a dozen seats.

What type of ballot is held for the French legislative elections?

The Legislative elections are a two-round winner-takes-it-all style election. In the first round on June 12 candidates must obtain the vote of more than 12.5 percent of registered voters in their electorate. Successful candidates will run again for the final round of the election, on 19 June where whoever gets the most votes wins.

In pre-Macron times, the second round would generally see a candidate from the left facing off a candidate from the right, with smaller eliminated first-round candidates calling on their supporters to back the candidate they most align with. In some instances, there would be a *triangulaire*, with three candidates eligible for the second round.

In the case of a *triangulaire*, parties from the left and right generally unite and make deals to defeat the far right. This strategy is called the Republican front: "anything but the far right." This is why Le Pen's party who got to the second round of the presidential election in 2017 – with over ten million votes! – only got seven out of 577 seats at the National Assembly. So, the French electoral system is anything but proportional, and there are a growing number of French people who question its representativeness.

Macron's 2017 legislative elections' success, which he is hoping to replicate, was based on running centrist candidates in nearly all electorates, doing well enough in the first round to qualify for the second, and then defeating their opponents — the supporters of eliminated candidates are more likely to vote for a less divisive centrist party. This phenomenon is accentuated by a projected 50 percent of French voters who are predicted not to cast a vote, which works in favour of lead centrist candidates who face less opposition in ballot boxes.

Macron's party tipped to obtain a majority

Given the complexity of legislative elections it can be difficult to predict which party will form government. Nevertheless, for the 2022 elections it is expected that the coalition that supports Macron, *Ensemble!*, will win a clear majority at the National Assembly.

Seat distribution at the French National Assembly

	Current (2017 legislative elections)	Predicted (June 2022 legislative elections)
Centrists (presidential majority)	346	300 to 340
The right	137	50 to 70
The left	70	135 to 165
The far right	12	20 to 35

The NUPES left-wing alliance is predicted to come second and become the main group of opposition to the presidential majority for the next five years. If so, this will be a major shift. In the 2017 legislative elections, the traditional right was Macron's first party of opposition because voters of the moderate left abandoned the socialist party to vote for Macron. Now, in 2022, the opposite is about to happen: disillusioned Macron left-wing voters are predicted to vote for NUPES while centre-right voters will abandon the *Républicains* because they are satisfied with Macron's previous term. Macron always says that he is from neither the left nor the right, but the proof of the pudding is in the voting: his electoral base has shifted toward the centre-right.

If Emmanuel Macron's alliance wins a majority at the National Assembly, there may be a small cabinet reshuffle based on the new Elisabeth Borne government, the current prime minister, it will largely remain unchanged. Expected reforms include longer working life prior to retirement, a focus on the environment, and a strong commitment to the European Union and its institutions.

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